

Supernatural Roots of Misery and the Imagery of Crisis in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

KUMAR CHANDRADEEP

Abstract: Both William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* reveal that supernatural intervention can be used as a great force that reveals hidden crimes, ignites dangerous desires, and leads their protagonists into psychological, moral and political woes. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost of the deceased king uncovers the hidden crime of regicide, and Hamlet is left with the responsibility of revenge. In *Macbeth*, the witches' prophecies stir up Macbeth's dormant ambition and make him think of kingship being within his reach as a destiny. Yet, the supernatural does not work as absolute power that deprives human freedom. Hamlet's suffering is from his doubt concerning the Ghost, the moral misgivings and the fear of damnation, while Macbeth's woe is from his purposeful misinterpretation of the equivocal prophecies and the determination to make the prophecies come true with violence. These crises are manifested in Shakespeare's imagery of darkness, blood, poison, disease, sleep, madness, decay, and unnatural disturbance. Blood and sleeplessness give the representation of the violated world of Scotland, while disease and corruption dominate Denmark. This paper asserts that the Ghost and the witches provide the inhuman and supernatural origins of tragic conflict, while the human interpretation and moral choice of that conflict render the revelations of the supernatural sources into misery. The image of crisis is thus linked to the broader loss of family, kingship, society and natural order.

Keywords: Shakespearean tragedy; supernaturalism; misery; crisis; imagery; regicide; guilt; revenge; equivocal prophecies.

In many of Shakespeare's tragedies, the individual is placed in the presence of entities that are not familiar or cannot be explained. Ghosts, witches, apparitions, prophecies, hallucinations, unnatural occurrences and mysterious voices do more than just instil a sense of fear; they reveal hidden crimes, awaken suppressed desires, undermine moral judgment and change the direction of political history. This role of the supernatural is especially important in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the main action of the tragedy starting with the protagonist meeting with another supernatural being. The Ghost tells the murdered king's son, Hamlet, that the king is

murdered and Claudius is guilty of the crime, and the Weird Sisters appear to Macbeth, predicting that he will become king of Scotland. Both of these discoveries reveal the invisible, but offer no unambiguous or moralistic course of action for either protagonist. Rather, they bring the questions, the temptations, the fears and the responsibilities into the minds of those already fragile with grief or desire for glory. The individual consciousness is thus not an isolated personal failure, but is instead part of a family, political and supernatural conflicts, as in Shakespearean tragedy.

In the present study, the phrase “supernatural roots of misery” refers to the Ghost and the Witches, along with apparitions, visions, and supernatural beliefs, which are seen as the causes of the tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, respectively, as they initiate and intensify the tragedies in these two plays. It does not imply that their destinies are only decided by the supernatural influences. Hamlet is ordered to kill his uncle, but the Ghost is not necessarily the true killer; the Ghost is not necessarily righteous, avenging his father may be a sinful act, and Hamlet can’t decide if revenge is the right course of action and if so, how to balance it with his conscience. The prophecy does not command Macbeth to kill Duncan, but says that he “shalt be king hereafter !” (*Macbeth* 1.3.50). In his tragedy, ambition misunderstands prophecy and promise as an imperative, a mandate. The pressure of the witches is not to be placed in the mind of an innocent man, but is apparent and audible in Macbeth already. As Kiernan Ryan notes :

The redundancy of the charms as causes of the catastrophe doesn’t detract, however, from their poetic power as testaments to the spellbound state in which Macbeth finds himself for reasons that owe nothing to witchcraft. The fact that the denizens of the play’s supernatural domain shouldn’t be reduced to symbols of the protagonist’s subjective state doesn’t mean that they don’t function symbolically as well. By the same token, the fact that the ghost of old Hamlet has an objective, discarnate existence independent of young Hamlet’s perception doesn’t preclude his enshrining the tradition

of the dead generations, which weighs like a nightmare on the mind of his living son. Macbeth would be theatrically and poetically impoverished without the witches and the apparitions their black arts conjure up. (218)

The supernatural thus serves as a catalyst to dramatize the inward conflicts and the protagonists are morally involved in the decisions which make the conflicts destructive.

The “imagery of crisis” denotes the verbal and dramatic images that link and unify private anguish and render it a familial, political and cosmic disorder. *Hamlet’s* use of the language of poison, disease, decay, weeds, graves, dust and rottenness makes Denmark seem like a diseased body with a hidden corruption that grows from the murder of its rightful king. The idea that private suffering is intermingled with a universal sense of corruptness is evident in Hamlet’s speech in which he speaks :

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d !
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter! O God! O
God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on’t ! ah fie ! ’tis an unweeded garden.
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in
nature. *Hamlet* 1.2.129–136)

In *Macbeth*, images of blood, darkness, sleeplessness, unnatural weather, hallucination and sterility symbolize the moral implications of regicide. Blood becomes a symbol of bravery among soldiers before becoming an indelible stigma of sin for Macbeth and his wife, and sleep is a natural restorative force until it is forever lost for Macbeth and his wife. The dagger which Macbeth sees is also a ghost, and Banquo’s ghost is also imaginary, adding to the ambiguity of whether it is the supernatural element which invades the world, or the psychological element which disturbs it, and in which the dagger or ghost of Banquo is a manifestation of guilt’s visible form.

The present paper therefore, explores the various types of miseries that are produced by the supernatural encounters in the two tragedies and how the motifs of the images convey the individual miseries to the miseries of the society at large. It suggests the supernatural origins of the tragic conflict are set by the Ghost and Weird Sisters, and the humans are not eradicated. Whereas Macbeth's unhappiness is caused by his desire, violent deeds and the accompanying guilt and reliance on ambiguous promises, Hamlet's is caused by his uncertainty, moral hesitation and crushing need to remember. Shakespeare illustrates death and sleeplessness, concealment and hallucination, through the contrasting patterns of disease and blood, and demonstrates that it is only when the supernatural influence intrudes into the troubled imagination and is transformed into human choice that it becomes tragic.

The supernaturalism of Shakespearean tragedy lies in a liminal area between the visible and the invisible operations of the human mind. The supernatural is not used by Shakespeare simply as an extra bit of showmanship or as a handy tool to scare the audience. It leads to a state in which the difference between what is allowed and what is not allowed, between providence and temptation, between destiny and choice, between moral duty and sinful action, etc., has become increasingly uncertain. The information that the supernatural reveals can be useful in ways other than what is normally experienced, but it seldom provides an interpretation with an ethical basis or a complete picture of the information. It thus has a central dramatic impact of creating a crisis of knowledge. A character can experience an apparition or a prophecy, but he must then make the decision as to what it means, if the source of the apparition or prophecy is to be trusted, and to what extent it guides his future actions. Thus, the misery produced by supernatural intervention is not only that of what the supernatural shows, but also that of the burden of interpreting it which places it on the human subject.

In the context of early modern England's religious and cultural polarizations, the supernatural aspects of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* take on greater significance. The audience Shakespeare wrote for had grown up in a world overshadowed by the Reformation, in which the old Catholic traditions were still uneasy with the Protestant teachings. While purgatory was accepted as a halfway house for imperfect souls to be purified before going to heaven in Catholic tradition, official Protestant doctrine denied purgatory and probably any appearances of the dead, and looked askance

on reports of such visitations. A spirit supposedly returning from purgatory could thus be interpreted as the soul of the deceased, the demonic 'deceased' or an illusion induced by melancholy, or even a more theatrical version of the ghost as a representation of the unreachable memory. Hamlet's uncertainty is the core of the Ghost's being. The apparition speaks of suffering after death and of being locked in purifying flames, echoing Catholic beliefs about purgatory. But Hamlet is a Protestant intellectual creature and can't simply take the Ghost's message for granted. But before he hears it, he asks :

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin
damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or
blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable
shape. (1.4. 40–43)

These alternatives pose the interpretative question which dominates the tragedy; the Ghost may be God speaking the truth, but it could also be a devil in disguise, trying to take advantage of Hamlet's grief feelings and inciting him to murder and damnation.

The command of the Ghost also comes in the context of the moral and religious problem of vengeance. In early-modern Christian thinking, murder not only transgresses the rights of one individual, but it also transgresses a divine law, a social order, kinship, and legitimate political authority. This violation became even more acute with the killing of a king, as the king is seen as the visible hub of the political and symbolic order of the state. Meanwhile, the private act of revenge was morally and legally questionable as the avenger arrogated to himself the right to judge, condemn and punish. According to Peter Lake, while justice and revenge might look alike, wanting to punish evil, they were fundamentally different in their authority: justice was to be public and lawful, revenge personal and possibly disruptive. He further comments :

While justice is public, revenge is
private. In the early modern period no
less than today, whereas judicial
punishment might retain many of the
lineaments of revenge— and perhaps
even perform some of the same social,

symbolic and emotional work— the official ideologies of both church and state sought to distinguish sharply between them. On one view a means to see justice done, and reparation made, as an extra- legal, private act, revenge also almost always led to another crime being committed and could thus itself easily become the source not of social peace but of continuing, indeed heightened, conflict. Unconstrained, the dynamic of action and reaction inherent in revenge, the mutually defining and confirming identities and enmities of revenger and revengee, could all too easily become perpetuated, almost institutionalized, in the feud. (167)

This separation puts Hamlet in a dilemma. The lawful institutions of Denmark are unable to punish Claudius, who is in control of these institutions and who manages to hide his crime. When the Ghost therefore, entrusts Hamlet with the mission of rectifying the wrong, he may be committing a crime that itself is wrong. It is this contradiction that is the source of Hamlet's miseries. He has to answer a call that is both pious and wicked, essential and hazardous, fair and self-serving. Much like regicide, the supernatural does not solve the moral dilemma but becomes more of an ethical dilemma on Hamlet's conscience.

The Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* come from another strand of the supernatural, but pose a no less serious problem of interpretation. The culture and politics of witchcraft was still very much alive in Jacobean England and witches were regularly depicted as agents of temptation, prophecy, evil and disruption. They were associated with storms, darkness, distorted bodies, mysterious rituals, and demonic forces, and thus provided a means for the expression of anxieties of disorder. However, Shakespeare's witches are not as straightforwardly Macbeth's fate controllers. The witches thus work best if seen as both objective supernatural presences and dramatic personae of forces already at work in *Macbeth*. They do not bring into existence altogether new desires in him; they evoke, magnify and give symbolic expression to desires already in him. Macbeth's astonished response to the prospect of kingship, and

his instant thought of murder indicate that the prophecy has stirred something within him, which he had never vocalized before. Later, Lady Macbeth's conjuration of the spirits that :

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature.

(*The Tragedy of Macbeth* 1.5.40-46)

'Tend on mortal thoughts' is a reinforcement of the link between supernatural agency and human desire. The spirits visit or invigorate "mortal thoughts"; they don't forgive the one who entertains them. Shakespeare is therefore careful not to let Macbeth be the victim to the magical determination. His tragedy needs to continue to have the element of choice, or else his tragedy becomes one of supernatural persecution and not a tragedy of ambition, guilt and self-destruction.

One of the key differences between the two plays is the direction of the supernatural experiences: past or future. *Hamlet's* Ghost returns from the past. It embodies the past unmet crime of killing and asks the living son to uphold the demands of the dead father. Memory thus ensnares Hamlet. He is forced to redefine himself as a man with a legacy of responsibility and fix a political system that has been damaged even before he was aware of the facts. In *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters, on the other hand, draw attention to the future. They give Macbeth an idea of what he could be, and tempt him to act as if the possibility is a reality. Whereas for Macbeth, a future refuses to pass, for Hamlet, a past won't go away. The Ghost tells Macbeth that a crime was committed and must now be avenged, and the witches proclaim that a crown could be in the future...and let Macbeth's imagination decide how to get it. The one encounter leads to the creation of an unwilling avenger, the other to the creation of an active murderer and tyrant.

The psychological miseries suffered by the two protagonists are also distinctive; they are contrasted by their differences in past and the future. Hamlet is provided with information about an event that has already

taken place and cannot be undone. His father is dead, his mother is married to his father's killer, and the crown is in the hands of corrupt officials. Thus, the Ghost puts a strain on Hamlet: he is forced to live in the fear of late discovery, because he finds out too late what has happened and how Claudius has been able to make crime political power. His job is to get back a past that has been hidden and to revive an order that can never again be restored without more bloodshed. By contrast, Macbeth is given information about an event that has yet to happen. The witches do not make a secret of a past crime, but they make an image of future greatness. His problem is that he can't let the future happen and has to force it to happen, via murder. The difference between Hamlet and Macbeth is that Macbeth wants to take the future for himself, while Hamlet wants to get out of the past. So that is how the supernatural knowledge displaces men from the present; Hamlet is stuck in the past, and Macbeth is stuck in the future.

This difference is also what accounts for the variety of different types of epistemological crisis depicted in the tragedies. Hamlet does not believe in the knowledge of the supernatural, but requires independent confirmation. His attempt to prove the Ghost's story by Claudius's reaction to it in the play within a play. His supernatural witnessing is transformed into a theatrical experiment, which he hopes will reveal the truth hidden behind the political façade. Macbeth, on the other hand, is more and more reliant on the knowledge of the supernatural. Instead of trying to test their language, he reads their predictions in the most favourable way he can think of to his desires. Their later "promises" that no "of woman born" shall harm him, and that he will be safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, do not foster a correct interpretation of the text. Hamlet's crisis escalates from too much doubt of the supernatural, whereas Macbeth's escalates from too much certainty in the supernatural. But, both characters also suffer from the fact that the meaning of the messages is not only not obvious but is created by humans.

Hamlet's and Macbeth's contrasting reactions show that the interaction of the supernatural with an inherent perceptual defect is most tragic. Hamlet's urge is to call into doubt what he sees or senses. Although the Ghost will tell him his story in the voice of his father and he decides that it fits with what Hamlet suspects, he remains afraid that the ghost might be a devil in disguise to make me believe with others that old men are more valued than young.

 Supernatural Roots of Misery and the Imagery of Crisis

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks
 I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 May be the devil; and the devil hath power
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy.

(*Hamlet* 2.2.622-630)

In his choice of *The Mousetrap*, he's attempting to go from supernatural testimony to observable evidence. The opposite way goes to *Macbeth*. He first suspects the witches' words are ominous, but he eventually comes to believe that it's a promise. *Macbeth* believes the words, but they have the most literal, and comforting, interpretation:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn
 The pow'r of man, for none of woman born
 Shall harm Macbeth
 ...Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care
 Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are.
 Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
 Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill.

(*Macbeth* 4.1.80-94)

Hamlet dithers because he thinks that he might be seeing ghosts, and *Macbeth* dithers because he believes that equivocation is the truth. Both answers result in misery. Too much doubt prevents *Hamlet* from attaining moral clarity and too much confidence blinds *Macbeth* of the bounds of prophetic knowledge. Shakespeare thus demonstrates that the meanings of supernatural messages are not fixed, but rather the tragic impact comes from the desires, fears and interpretative tendencies of those who receive the message.

The image of crisis is the poetic, theatrical way of making these invisible conflicts perceptible. Shakespeare's images are not simply decorative comparisons which are tacked on to a full tragic action. They create cyclical relationships where psychological disorder, moral decay, political violence and unnatural disorder coalesce. In *Hamlet*, the imagery of disease, poison, weeds, ulcer, decay, graves, dust and rotteness illustrates a kingdom that's outwardly corrupt, but inwardly rotten.

Claudius's assassination of his brother by pouring poison into his ear is the genesis of the image of an infected society through clandestine means. From there, poison takes on political and linguistic significance: false words, espionage, control and covertness spread through Denmark, just as silently as it spread through the sleeping king's body. The blood, darkness, insomnia, hallucination, the wild beasts, and inclement weather in *Macbeth* embody the ramifications of regicide. Honourable services are dishonoured, and dishonour is made an honourable virtue: virtue itself becomes an orphan, friendlessness is fathered upon brotherhood; and peace is shown like an ass in the gentle brow of war.

The supernatural and imagery thus serve similar, yet different purposes. Ghosts, witches and apparitions put the protagonists in touch with an unseen order, while the recurring images reveal how this contact is made conscious and how it transforms the visible order. The Ghost lets Hamlet know of the corruption in Denmark; the disease and decay imagery then makes him see the corruption in every area. The witches lead Macbeth towards the prospect of kingship; the repeated motifs of blood, darkness and sleeplessness show the moral and psychological toll of Macbeth's pursuit of kingship. Supernatural presence and inner crisis are also mixed up by the appearance of apparitions and hallucinations. Macbeth's dagger might be a dagger outside of himself or it could represent the notions of murder that he has; Banquo's Ghost could be a ghost that visits Macbeth or it could be the visible manifestation of guilt. Either way, the stage provides a tangible form to that which isn't necessarily either all internal or all external.

The use of imagery of crisis in the two plays also accentuates how the disturbance of the supernatural consciousness shifts to the political body. The main images in *Hamlet* are of infection, poison, rotteness, weeds, ulcers, graves and decay. Images relating to a court where violence is not exposed but covered up by ceremony and persuasive words. Perhaps Claudius kills by pouring poison surreptitiously in the ear; his reign is maintained by other equally clandestine means: spying, coaxing, pretending friendship, and hiding motives. Hence, the Danish crisis is described as a disease of Denmark that manifests itself through its symptoms over time. Crisis is depicted more immediately and violently in *Macbeth* through images of blood, darkness, sleeplessness, storms and the unnatural behaviour of animals. Each act of killing increases the initial

murder of Duncan, until the land of Scotland seems to bleed, and Macbeth is convinced that they are guilty. As Janette Dillon observes :

The violent and bloody images of the play, the horses that eat each other, the mother plucking her child from the nipple to dash out its brains, the bloody child, the 'blood-bolter'd Banquo' (4.1.123), conjure up a world where this kind of interaction seems the norm, and Macbeth's soliloquies take us into the heart of what it feels like to be immersed in such violence. (119)

The contrast is great: Denmark is poisoned, Scotland is injured, and corruption in Hamlet is a secret thing, while violence in Macbeth is an ever-growing and unmanageable thing. But both the images relate regicide to a nation in turmoil. Not only does the crime against the king spill over into the royal chamber, but also into language, consciousness, family, politics and nature. It is in this way that Shakespeare uses imagery to document the supernatural and moral crisis in a visual record.

Therefore, the supernaturalism of Shakespeare is not so straightforward as the opposition of human beings to a mysterious power determining their fate. It establishes a more complex relationship between the outside world, cultural values, individual's needs, moral decisions and imagination. Hamlet and Macbeth are neither helpless instruments nor are the ghosts and the witches the source of the main crises; these are brought about and/or worsened by the presence of the ghosts and the witches. The protagonists are still held accountable for the manner in which they interpret the communication between the supernatural and how they turn that into action or inaction. Meanwhile, their decisions are not independent of the political, religious and social context where those decisions are taken. Thus, the cause of miseries is not only of a metaphysical nature, but also psychological. They are situated at the intersection of the unseen and the imagination of humankind, of the uncertain and the moral pressure, and of the private and the public catastrophe. This conceptual connection forms the ground for considering the nature of the transformations of grief into a crisis of memory, conscience and revenge, and political responsibility in Hamlet wrought by the ghost.

The supernatural is the source of the tragic woes in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The Ghost puts the idea of revenge on Hamlet's shoulders, and the Weird Sisters stir up Macbeth's desire for power with enigmatic prophecies. Hamlet is characterized by doubt and hesitation, his morals and conscience constantly torment him, while Macbeth becomes more and more confident, violent, and reliant on supernatural assurance. In their varied reactions, it is clear that tragedy arises not simply as the result of the gods' action, but because of the way the knowledge is handled by the troubled minds. Shakespeare underlines this crisis by using powerful imagery – poison, disease, decay, graves, rottenness reveal the hidden corruption of Denmark; blood, darkness, sleeplessness, unnatural disturbances represent the guilt and violence that spread across Scotland. The supernatural and the imagery of crisis are therefore interwoven, making it at once apparent how personal miseries and moral decay can slowly spread to family ruin, political chaos and community affliction.

Kumar Chandradeep

Professor and Former Head

P.G. Department of English

College of Commerce, Arts & Science, Patna.

Works Cited

Dillon, Janette. *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

Lake, Peter. "Tragedy and Religion: Religion and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*." *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, edited by Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk. Oxford UP, 2016.

Ryan, Kiernan. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by John Livingston Lowes. Henry Holt and Company, 1914.

_____. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Edited by George Lyman Kittredge. Ginn and Company, 1939.